

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Elizabeth Beckley [Gundlach], Cornell 1939

Editor's Note: *Though Cornell University has not always been women-friendly,¹ the administration and faculty of the New York State Veterinary College (as it was called then) led the way in educating women veterinarians in the early decades of the 20th century. The earliest example of Cornell's commitment to admitting women to veterinary medicine dates to 1905 when Principal James Law admitted a woman who came all the way from England because she couldn't get a veterinary degree in her home country. Unfortunately, Stella de Liancount Berthier voluntarily left the college part way through her first year, citing her displeasure "in not devoting the time given to this study to something pertaining more particularly to the branch of veterinary work (canine and feline) in which I want ultimately to specialise."² Apparently Law did not let that situation dissuade him from admitting a second woman, Florence Kimball, two years later.³*

Thirty-four women received their DVM degrees from Cornell before 1950. The classes of 1939 and 1940 which each matriculated four years earlier in the middle of the Great Depression had a combined seven women (9%) in their two classes, a remarkable proportion of women at that time.⁴ Following graduation, all became actively engaged in veterinary medicine in one form or another and at least one, Dr. Patrician O'Connor [Halloran], is a well-known name in women's veterinary legacy.

This and two following stories describe the three women in the Class of 1939, the educational climate in which they studied, and the professional careers they pursued.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Elizabeth G. Beckley [Gundlach] was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1916, the daughter of an insurance executive. Elizabeth became determined to become a veterinarian at age nine. She did her required one year of undergraduate work at Cornell University in a class of 400 students before matriculating in the veterinary college along with two other women and 36 men in 1935 (Class of 1939). Based on oral interviews I conducted with the nine surviving men from that

class over the last six years, I concluded that these women had a very good relationship with their male colleagues. In fact, I did not receive a single negative comment about having women in their classes, something that has not been true in later classes.

For example, Dr. Robert Ferber shared his impression of having three women classmates.⁵

“They mixed with the guys in the class, Pat and Elizabeth, and Rikki, too; there was no discussion about them being women in the class. And there was no discussion about them being unusual [in their pursuit] to study veterinary medicine, as I recall it. If you want to be a veterinarian, that’s great.”

Another classmate, Clarence Bent, referred to the women as “nice people,” implying that they were simply thought of as members of the class.⁶ Other classmates spoke very matter-of-factly about the coed nature of their class, as if it mattered little whether it was all male or had a small cohort of women.



Elizabeth Beckley, graduation photo New York State Veterinary College, 1939
(© Cornell University)

After graduation, Dr. Beckley worked in small animal practices in Buffalo, nearby Amherst, and also in Pittsburgh. In one of the practices, she occupied a second-floor room in the veterinarian’s home, which also housed the animal clinic. The veterinarian’s teenage sons also had rooms on the second floor. “She was a quiet, rather timid person and we teased her mercilessly,” one of the sons who later became a veterinarian confided to me a few years ago. “I don’t know how she put up with us for so long [before getting another job].”⁷

Dr. Beckley is thought to have been the only woman veterinarian in Buffalo, which had a population of over half a million in 1940. In a 1943 newspaper article, Dr. Beckley was described as in her middle twenties, “an attractive blonde, five feet five in height, tipping the scales at only a few pounds more than 100.In these days, when so many men of her profession are off to serve Uncle Sam, she is doing an important and needed man’s job here at home.”⁸

When Dr. Beckley was once asked to describe the disadvantages of being a woman veterinarian, she simply said, “The only really serious one is that a woman can’t raise a mustache as a man can, to give you the impression of extra years and greater maturity.”⁹

Though subsequent records are incomplete, Dr. Beckley appears to have remained in small animal practice in Buffalo until at least 1952. She was thereafter listed as “inactive” in her veterinary career. According to AVMA records, she moved to Marine City, Michigan, by the late 1950s and thereafter Pompano Beach, Florida.¹⁰ She died in Blount County, Tennessee, on January 28, 1998.

Many women veterinarians of the 1930s and 1940s had memorable careers, achieving notoriety that is remembered by historians and cited by students in reports of “early women.” Dr. Beckley was not one of them. She practiced small animal medicine as an associate in at least two states, and appears to have left active veterinary work after about 15 years, during which she married and had a son.

From where I write 70 years later, Dr. Beckley was a compassionate and competent veterinarian, leading the way for future generations in ways that she probably never could have imagined. In my view, Dr. Beckley is one of the many trailblazing women whose courage in pursuing a male-dominated profession deserves acknowledgement as much as those whose names are better known.

¹ Cornell’s policies for admitting women into veterinary college in the 1960s and early 1970s were very restrictive.

² Two archival letters in her own handwriting describe Stella’s desire to concentrate on small animal medicine and rebuking the faculty for not accommodating her interests in dogs.

³ Florence Kimball matriculated in 1907 and graduated on schedule in the Class of 1910.

⁴ Thirty-nine students matriculated in fall 1935 in the Class of 1939; 40 matriculated in fall 1936 in the Class of 1936. (College Announcements, Cornell University).

⁵ Ferber, Robert (DVM Cornell, 1939, retired small animal veterinarian), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2007, Nov 7. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12878>

⁶ Bent, Clarence (DVM Cornell 1939, deceased), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2008, July 1. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14195>

⁷ Name withheld, telephone interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), 2008.

⁸ Smith, H. Katherine, Woman Veterinarian Here Is Alone in Her Field. Dr. Elizabeth G. Beckley Puts in Full Time At Profession; Ahead of All Recreations (1943), newspaper not identified.

⁹ Leonard, Ellis P. In the James Law Tradition (1908-1848). New York State College of Veterinary Medicine (Pub) 1982. P 257.

¹⁰ AVMA Membership Directories, available in 1943, 1947, 1947, and biannually starting in 1952. There is no AVMA record of Dr. Beckley in 1966.

KEYWORDS:

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Dr. Elizabeth Beckley Gundlach
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TOPICS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.